



To Charge or Not to Charge?

Question: Are schools required to allow students to charge meals?

Answer: No. USDA Policy states: “Under the law, the regulations, and the guidance, there is no requirement that children paying the reduced or full price be given credit which permits them to charge the price of meals when they don’t have money with them to pay.” SP 94-77

At the end of each school year, school personnel call our office and ask what they can do to collect money from families or staff that have charged meals. Collecting is often very difficult. Losing revenue can seriously affect the school meals program budget. The best solution is to prevent the problem in the future.

It is strongly recommended that schools have a written policy regarding the charging of meals and a la carte foods. It is important the food service staff, administration and the school board work together to adopt a policy that will be used for all students and staff. Many schools require all students to have cash for a la carte foods. The policy should be developed and distributed to all families at the beginning of each school year in the school newsletter or handbook.

Issues to consider when formulating a charge policy:

1. All students paying the reduced or full price must be treated the same.
2. Who will track charges and attempt to collect payments?
3. How will the charge policy be shared with families/staff?
4. What will be the maximum number of charges allowed?
5. When and how will families/staff be notified that charges have reached the maximum number?
6. Will any provisions be made for students/staff who have exceeded the maximum number of charges and do not have money for lunch?
7. Does administration/school board support the policy? Will it be enforced with no exceptions allowed?

Charge policy options:

1. A strict, no-charge policy. If no money, no food is available.
2. A limited charge policy (2 or 3 meals) after which no food is available.
3. A limited charge policy as above, but allowing charging for a standard, less appealing but reimbursable “courtesy meal” for a specific number of days after which no food is available.
4. A limited charge policy as above and either charging or providing a standard, very limited non-reimbursable “courtesy meal” which is available only for a specific number of days after which no food is available.

Important note: If a student has an unpaid charge balance and brings at least enough money for one meal, the child must be offered the regular meal that day.